

## Chapter VII

# DOUBLE MURDER AT WEST AMBLER JOHNSTON

This chapter discusses the double homicide at West Ambler Johnston (WAJ) residence hall and the police and university actions taken in response. It covers the events up to the shootings in Norris Hall, which are presented in the next chapter.

### APPROACH AND ATTACK

Cho left his dormitory early in the morning of April 16, 2007 and went to the WAJ, about a 2-minute walk. He was seen outside WAJ by a student about 6:45 a.m. Figure 3 shows the exterior of WAJ and Figure 4, a typical hallway inside WAJ.



**Figure 3. Exterior of West Ambler Johnston**

Because Cho's student mailbox was located in the lobby of WAJ, he had access to that dormitory with his pass card, but only after 7:30 a.m.

Cho somehow gained entrance to the dormitory, possibly when a student coming out let him in or by tailgating someone going in. (No one remembers having done so, or admits it.)

Cho went to the fourth floor by either stairway or elevator to the room of student Emily Hilscher.



**Figure 4. Hallway Outside Dorm Rooms in West Ambler Johnston**

She had just returned with her boyfriend, a student at Radford University who lived in Blacksburg. He drove her back to her dorm, saw her enter, and drove away. She entered at 7:02 a.m., based on swipe card records, which also showed that she used a different entrance than Cho did. Although it is known that Cho previously stalked female students, including one in WAJ on her floor, the police have found no connection between Cho and Hilscher from any written materials, dorm mates, other friends of his or hers, or any other source.

As of this writing, the police still had found no motive for the slaying.



**Figure 5. Typical Dorm Room in Ambler Johnston Hall**

Not long after 7:15 a.m., noises emanating from Hilscher's room were loud enough and of such a disturbing nature that resident advisor Ryan Clark, who lived next door, checked to see what was happening. The presumption is that he came to investigate, saw Cho, and was killed to stop any interference with the shooter and his identification. Both Hilscher and Clark were shot by Cho at close range. (Figure 5 shows a typical dorm room in WAJ.)

The sounds of the shots or bodies falling were misinterpreted by nearby students as possibly someone falling out of a loft bed, which had happened before. A student in a nearby room called the Virginia Tech Police Department (VTPD), which dispatched a police officer and an emergency medical service (EMS) team—standard protocol for this type of call. The police received the call at 7:20 a.m. and arrived outside at 7:24 a.m. (an EMS response under 5 minutes for dispatch plus travel time is better than average, even in a city).<sup>1</sup> The EMS team arrived on scene at 7:26 and at the dorm room at 7:29. As soon as the police officer arrived and saw the gunshot wounds, he called for additional police assistance. Hilscher was transported to Montgomery Regional Hospital where

she received care, and then transferred to Carilion Roanoke Memorial Hospital where she died. Clark was treated en route to Montgomery Regional Hospital, but could not be resuscitated by the emergency medical technicians (EMTs) and was pronounced dead shortly after arrival at the hospital. Their wounds were considered nonsurvivable at the time and in retrospect.

In the meantime, Cho somehow exited the building. No one reported seeing him leaving, according to police interviews of people in the dorm at the time. His clothes and shoes were bloodied, and he left bloody footprints in and coming out of the room. His clothes were found later in his room. Students were getting ready for 8:00 a.m. classes, but no one reported seeing Cho. Figure 6 shows the door to Hilscher's dorm room, with a peephole typical of others on that floor.

When Chief Wendell Flinchum of the VTPD learned of the incident at 7:40 a.m., he called for additional resources from the Blacksburg Police Department (BPD). A detective for investigation and an evidence technician headed for the scene. Chief Flinchum notified the office of the executive vice president at 7:57 a.m., after obtaining more information on what was found.

Immediately after they arrived, police started interviewing students in the rooms near Hilscher's room, and essentially locked down the building, with police inside and outside. (The

<sup>1</sup> This is based on data from 150 TriData studies of fire and EMS departments over 25 years. The National Fire Protection Association standard calls for a fire or EMS response in 5 minutes (1 minute turnout time, 4 minutes travel time) in 90 percent of calls, but few agencies meet that objective.



**Figure 6. Emily Hilscher's Door With Peephole**

exterior dorm doors were still locked from the usual nighttime routine.) A female friend of Hilscher came to the dorm to accompany her to class, as was their common practice, and she was immediately questioned by the police. She reported that Hilscher had been visiting her boyfriend, knew of no problems between them, and that Hilscher's boyfriend owned a gun and had been practicing on a target range with it. She knew his name and the description of his vehicle and that he usually drove her back to the dorm. The boyfriend was immediately considered a "person of interest."<sup>2</sup> Because he had been the last known person to see her before the shooting, he was the natural starting point for an investigation. No one had seen him drop her off. (The fact that he had dropped her off was established more than an hour later, after he was questioned.) The police then sent out a BOLO (be on the lookout) alert for his pickup

<sup>2</sup> "Person of interest" means someone who might be a suspect or might have relevant information about a crime.

truck and searched for it in the campus parking lots but could not find it. This implied that the only known person of interest had likely left the campus. There were no other leads at that time.

The police had no evidence other than shell casings in the room, the footprints, and the victims. The VTPD police chief said that this murder might have taken a long time to solve, if ever, for lack of evidence and witnesses. After the second incident occurred, the gun was identified by ATF as having been the same one used in the first shooting, but that was hindsight. If Cho had stopped after the first two shootings, he might well have never been caught.

### PREMATURE CONCLUSION?

At this point, the police may have made an error in reaching a premature conclusion that their initial lead was a good one, or at least in conveying that impression to the Virginia Tech administration. While continuing their investigation, they did not take sufficient action to deal with what might happen if the initial lead proved false. They conveyed to the university Policy Group that they had a good lead and that the person of interest was probably not on campus. (That is how the Policy Group understood it, according to its chair and other members who were interviewed by the panel and who presented information at one of its open hearings.) After two people were shot dead, police needed to consider the possibility of a murderer loose on campus who did a double slaying for unknown reasons, even though a domestic disturbance was a likely possibility. The police did not urge the Policy Group to take precautions, as best can be understood from the panel's interviews.

It was reasonable albeit wrong that the VTPD thought this double murder was most likely the result of a domestic argument, given the facts they had initially, including the knowledge that the last person known to have been with the female victim was her boyfriend who owned a gun and cared greatly for her, according to police interviews, plus the fact that she was shot

with a young man in her room under the circumstances found.

There are very few murders each year on campuses—an average of about 16 across 4,000 universities and colleges, as previously noted. The only college campus mass murder in the United States in the past 40 years was the University of Texas tower sniper attack, though there have been occasional multiple murders. Based on past history, the probability of more shootings following a dormitory slaying was very low. The panel researched reports of multiple shootings on campuses for the past 40 years, and no scenario was found in which the first murder was followed by a second elsewhere on campus. (See Appendix L for a summary of the multiple criminal shootings on campus.) The VTPD had the probabilities correct, but needed to consider the low-probability side as well as the most likely situation.

Both the VTPD and the BPD immediately put their emergency response teams (ERTs) (i.e., SWAT teams) on alert and staged them at locations from which they could respond rapidly to the campus or city. They also had police on campus looking for the gunman while they pursued the boyfriend. The ERTs were staged mainly in case they had to make an arrest of the gunman or serve search warrants on the shooting suspect.

## DELAYED ALERT TO UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

The VTPD chief and BPD chief both responded to the murder scene in minutes. Chief Flinchum of the VTPD arrived at 8:00 a.m. and Chief Crannis of the BPD arrived at 8:13 a.m. As noted above, the VTPD chief had notified the university administration of the shootings at 7:57 a.m., just before he arrived at the scene.

Once informed, the university president almost immediately convened the emergency Policy Group to decide how to respond, including how and when to notify the university community. In

an interview with President Steger, members of the panel were told that the police reports to the Policy Group first described a possible “murder-suicide” and then a “domestic dispute,” and that the police had identified a suspect. After the area parking lots had been searched, the police reported the suspect probably had left the campus.

The police did not tell the Policy Group that there was a chance the gunman was loose on campus or advise the university of any immediate action that should be taken such as canceling classes or closing the university. Also, the police did not give any direction as to an emergency message to be sent to the students. The police were very busy at WAJ investigating what had happened, gathering evidence, and managing the scene. They were conveying information by phone to the Policy Group at this point. Not until 9:25 a.m. did the police have a representative sitting with the Policy Group, a police captain.

The VTPD has the authority under the Emergency Response Plan and its interpretation in practice to request that an emergency message be sent, but as related in Chapter II, the police did not have the capability to send a message themselves. That capability was in the hands of the associate vice president for University Affairs and one other official. As stated earlier, the VTPD is not a member of the Policy Group but is often invited to attend Policy Group meetings dealing with the handling of emergencies.

One of the factors prominent in the minds of the Policy Group, according to the university president and others who were present that day, was the experience gained the previous August when a convict named William Morva escaped from a nearby prison and killed a law enforcement officer and a guard at a local hospital. Police reported he might be on the VT campus. The campus administration issued an alert that a murderer was on the loose in the vicinity of the campus. Then a female employee of the bank in the Squires Student Activities Center reportedly called her mother on a cell phone, and the

mother incorrectly inferred that people were being held hostage in the student center. The mother called the police, who responded with a SWAT team. News photos of the event show students rushing out of the building with their hands up while police with drawn automatic weapons and bulletproof vests were charging into the building, a potentially dangerous situation. It was a false alarm. Morva was captured off campus, but this situation was fresh in the minds of the Policy Group as it met to decide what to do on the report of the double homicide at WAJ. It is questionable whether there was any panic among the students in the Morva incident, as some reports had it, and how dangerous that situation really was, but the Policy Group remembered it as a highly charged and dangerous situation. In the eyes of the Policy Group, including the university president, a dangerous situation had been created by their warning in that August 2006 event coupled with the subsequent spread of rumors and misinformation. The Policy Group did not want to cause a repeat of that situation if the police had a suspect and he was thought to be off campus.

Even with the police conveying the impression to campus authorities that the probable perpetrator of the dormitory killings had left campus and with the recent past history of the “panic” caused by the alert 9 months earlier, the university Policy Group still made a questionable decision. They sent out a carefully worded alert an hour and half after they heard that there was a double homicide, which was now more than 2 hours after the event.

Vice Provost of Student Affairs David Ford presented a statement to the panel on May 21, 2007. He was a member of the university Policy Group that made the decisions on what to do after hearing about the shootings.

Shortly after 8:00 a.m. on Monday, April 16, I was informed that there had been a shooting in West Ambler Johnston hall and that President Steger was assembling the Policy Group immediately. By approximately 8:30 a.m., I and the other members of the group had arrived at the Burruss

Hall Boardroom and Dr. Steger convened the meeting. I learned subsequently that as he awaited the arrival of other group members, President Steger had been in regular communication with the police, had given direction to have the governor's office notified of the shooting, and had called the head of University Relations to his office to begin planning to activate the emergency communication systems.

When he convened the meeting, President Steger informed the Policy Group that Virginia Tech police had received a call at approximately 7:20 a.m. on April 16, 2007, to investigate an incident in a residence hall room in West Ambler Johnston. Within minutes of the call, Virginia Tech police and Virginia Tech Rescue Squad members responded to find two gunshot victims, a male and a female, inside a room in the residence hall. Information continued to be received through frequent telephone conversations with Virginia Tech police on the scene. The Policy Group was informed that the residence hall was being secured by Virginia Tech police, and students within the hall were notified and asked to remain in their rooms for their safety. We were further informed that the room containing the gunshot victims was immediately secured for evidence collection, and Virginia Tech police began questioning hall residents and identifying potential witnesses. In the preliminary stages of the investigation, it appeared to be an isolated incident, possibly domestic in nature. The Policy Group learned that Blacksburg police and Virginia state police had been notified and were also on the scene.

The Policy Group was further informed by the police that they were following up on leads concerning a person of interest in relation to the shooting. During this 30-minute period of time between 8:30 and 9:00 a.m., the Policy Group processed the factual information it had in the context of many questions we asked ourselves. For instance, what information do we release without causing a panic? We learned from the Morva incident last August that speculation and misinformation spread by individuals who do not have the facts cause panic. Do we confine the information to students in West Ambler Johnston since

the information we had focused on a single incident in that building? Beyond the two gunshot victims found by police, was there a possibility that another person might be involved (i.e., a shooter), and if so, where is that person, what does that person look like, and is that person armed? At that time of the morning, when thousands are in transit, what is the most effective and efficient way to convey the information to all faculty, staff, and students? If we decided to close the campus at that point, what would be the most effective process given the openness of a campus the size of Virginia Tech? How much time do we have until the next class change?

And so with the information the Policy Group had at approximately 9 a.m., we drafted and edited a communication to be released to the university community via e-mail and to be placed on the university web site. We made the best decision we could based upon the information we had at the time. Shortly before 9:30 a.m., the Virginia Tech community—faculty, staff, and students—were notified by e-mail as follows:

*"A shooting incident occurred at West Ambler Johnston earlier this morning. Police are on the scene and are investigating. The university community is urged to be cautious and are asked to contact Virginia Tech Police if you observe anything suspicious or with information on the case. Contact Virginia Tech Police at 231-6411. Stay tuned to the [www.vt.edu](http://www.vt.edu). We will post as soon as we have more information"*

The Virginia Tech Emergency/Weather Line recordings were also transmitted and a broadcast telephone message was made to campus phones. The Policy Group remained in session in order to receive additional updates about the West Ambler Johnston case and to consider further actions if appropriate.

No mention was made in the initial message sent to the students and staff of a double murder, just a shooting, which might have implied firing a gun and injuries, possibly accidental, rather than two murdered. Students and faculty were advised to be alert. The message went out to e-mails and phones. Some students and fac-

ulty saw the alert before the second event but many, if not most, did not see it, nor did most in Norris Hall classes. Those who had 9:05 a.m. classes were already in them and would not have seen the message unless checking their computers, phone, or Blackberries in class. If the message had gone out earlier, between 8:00 and 8:30 a.m., more people would have received it before leaving for their 9:05 a.m. classes. If an audible alert had been sounded, even more might have tuned in to check for an emergency message.

Few anywhere on campus seemed to have acted on the initial warning messages; no classes were canceled, and there was no unusual absenteeism. When the Norris Hall shooting started, few connected it to the first message.

The university body was not put on high alert by the actions of the university administration and was largely taken by surprise by the events that followed. Warning the students, faculty, and staff might have made a difference. Putting more people on guard could have resulted in quicker recognition of a problem or suspicious activity, quicker reporting to police, and quicker response of police. Nearly everyone at Virginia Tech is adult and capable of making decisions about potentially dangerous situations to safeguard themselves. So the earlier and clearer the warning, the more chance an individual had of surviving.

## DECISION NOT TO CANCEL CLASSES OR LOCK DOWN

Many people have raised the question of whether the university should have been locked down. One needs to analyze the feasibility of doing this for a campus of 35,000 people, and what the results would have been even if feasible. Most police chiefs consulted in this review believe that a lockdown was not feasible.

When a murder takes place in a city of 35,000 population, the entire city is virtually never shut down. At most, some in the vicinity of the shooting might be alerted if it is thought that

the shooter is in the neighborhood. People might be advised by news broadcast or bullhorns to stay inside. A few blocks might be cordoned off, but not a city of 35,000. A university, however, in some ways has more control than does the mayor or police of a city, so the analogy to a city is not entirely fitting. The university is also considered by many as playing a role in *loco parentis* for at least some of its students, even those who are legally adults, a view shared by several victims' families.

President Steger noted that closing the university in an emergency presents another problem, traffic congestion. In the Morva incident, when the school was closed, it took over an hour and a half for the traffic to clear despite trying to stage the evacuation. Numerous people also stood waiting for buses. Those evacuating were very vulnerable in their cars and at bus stops.

Some people suggested that the university should have closed out of respect for the two students who were killed. However, the general practice at most large universities is not to close when a student dies, regardless of the cause (suicide, homicide, traffic accident, overdose, etc.). Universities and colleges need to make that decision based on individual criteria.

**Feasibility** – A building can be locked down in the sense of locking the exterior doors, barring anyone from coming or going. Elementary schools practice that regularly, and so do some intermediate and high schools. At least some schools in Blacksburg were locked down for a while after the first shootings. Usually, a lock-down also implies locking individual classrooms. Virginia Tech does not have locks on the inside of classroom doors, as is the case for most universities and many high schools.

The analogy to elementary or high schools, however, is not very useful. The threat in elementary schools usually is not from students, the classrooms have locks, they have voice communication systems to teachers and students, and the people at risk are in one building, not 131 buildings. High schools usually have one building and some of the other characteristics too.

A message could theoretically be sent to all buildings on campus to lock their doors, but there was no efficient way to do this at Virginia Tech. It would have required calls or e-mails to individuals who had the ability to lock the doors for at least 131 buildings or sending people on foot to each building. E-mails might have been used, but one could not be sure they would be read promptly. Even if people in the buildings received a message by phone or e-mail, the university had no way of knowing who received the message without follow up calls or requesting returned responses to the calls and e-mails. The process was complicated and would have taken considerable time.

Some university campuses, mostly urban ones, have guards at every entrance to their buildings. Virginia Tech does not. It would take approximately 450–500 guards to post one at all entrances of all major buildings on the VT campus.<sup>3</sup> The VTPD at full strength has 41 officers, of which only 14 are on-duty at 8:00 a.m. on a weekday, 5 on patrol and 9 in the office including the chief. It is unlikely all VT buildings could be guarded or closed within 1–2 hours after the first shooting.

Closing all of the roads into the school would also be a problem. The large campus includes 16 vehicle entrances separated in some cases by a mile from each other. More police can be brought in from Blacksburg and other areas. Without a clear emergency, however, it is inconceivable that large numbers of police would rush to the campus, leaving non-campus areas at risk from the same gunman and all other crimes when it was not expected to be more than an isolated incident.

There are no barriers to pedestrians walking across lawns into the campus. It would have taken hundreds of police, National Guard troops, or others to truly close down the campus, and they could not have arrived in time.

<sup>3</sup> There are about 30 dorm-type buildings with an average of about two entrances each, and 100 classroom/administration buildings with an average of about four entrances each, for an estimated total of about 460.

Messages might have been prioritized to reach the buildings with the most people and to guard them first, but it still was impractical and not seriously considered. All police with whom the panel consulted felt that a lockdown for a campus like Virginia Tech was not feasible on the morning of April 16.

More feasible would have been canceling classes and asking everyone to stay home or stay indoors until an all-clear was given, although even getting that message to everyone quickly was problematical with the new emergency alerting system not totally in place. Students could have been asked to return to their dormitories or to housing off campus. However, many might have gone to other public buildings on campus unless those buildings also were ordered to close. Canceling classes and getting a message out to students off campus would have stopped some from coming onto the campus. But students still could congregate vulnerably in dorms or other places.

Furthermore, the police and university did not know whether the gunman was inside or outside WAJ or other buildings. People not in buildings, typically numbering in the thousands outdoors on the campus at a given time, may seek refuge in buildings in the face of an emergency. Without knowing where the gunman is, one might be sending people into a building with the gunman, or sending them outside where a gunman is waiting. The shooters at the Jonesboro Middle School massacre in Arkansas in 1998 planned to create an alarm inside their school building and get students and faculty to go outside where the shooters were set up.

Cho, too, could have shot people in the open on campus, after an alert went out, waiting for them outside. Although he was armed with only handguns, no one knew that at the time. The Texas tower shooter sniped at people with a rifle outdoors.

***Impact of Lockdown or Closedown*** – In this event, the shooter was a member of the campus community, an insider with a pass card to get into his dorm, able to receive whatever message

was sent to the university community, and able to go anywhere that students were allowed to go. He would have received an alert, too.

It might be argued that the total toll would have been less if the university had canceled classes and announced it was closed for business immediately after the first shooting; or if the earlier alert message had been stronger and clearer. Even with the messaging system that was in place on April 16, many could have received messages before they left for class by e-mail or phone before 9 a.m., and the message probably would have quickly spread mouth to mouth as well. Even if it only partially reduced the university population on campus, it might have done some good. It is the panel's judgment that, all things considered, the toll could have been reduced had these actions been taken. But none of these measures would likely have averted a mass shooting altogether. There is a possibility that the additional measures would have dissuaded Cho from acting further, but he had already killed two people and sent a tape to NBC that would arrive the following morning with all but a confession. From what we know of his mental state and commitment to action that day, it was likely that he would have acted out his fantasy somewhere on campus or outside it that same day.

This was a single-shooter scenario; Columbine High School had two shooters, and that scenario was quite different. Emergency planners have to anticipate various high-risk scenarios and how to prepare for them. They must be aware that what happens will rarely be just like the scenario planned for. The right thing for one scenario might be just the wrong thing to do for another, such as whether to tell people to stay inside buildings or get outside.

## CONTINUING EVENTS

To continue the story of April 16, there was not an event, a pause for 2 hours, and then a second event. The notion that there was a 2-hour gap as mentioned in some news stories and by many who sent questions to the panel is a

misconception. There was continuous action and deliberations from the first event until the second, and they made a material difference in the results of the second event.

**Police Actions** – The VTPD and the other law enforcement agencies involved did a professional job in pursuing the investigation of the WAJ incident with the one large and unfortunate exception of having conveyed the impression to the university administration that they probably had a solid suspect who probably had left the campus. These agencies did not know that with certainty. A stronger patrol of the campus and random checking of bags being carried might have found Cho carrying guns. Cho, however, was one of tens of thousands of students on campus, did not stand out in appearance, and carried his weapons in a backpack like many other backpacks. The police had no clues pointing to anyone other than the boyfriend, and it would not have been reasonable to expect them to be able to check what each person on campus was carrying.

The VTPD and BPD mobilized their emergency response teams after the first shooting. They did not know what the followup would bring, but they wanted to be ready for whatever occurred. The VTPD had not investigated a homicide in recent memory, and properly called on the resources of the BPD, state police, and ultimately ATF and FBI to assist in the investigation.

**Boyfriend Questioning** – At 9:30 a.m., the boyfriend of Emily Hilscher was stopped in his pickup truck on a road. He was cooperative and shocked to hear that his girlfriend had just been killed. He passed a field test for the presence of gunpowder residue. While he remained a person of interest, it appeared unlikely that he was the shooter, with the implication that the real shooter was probably still at large. The police passed this information to the university leadership through the police captain who was interacting with the university staff.

This negative finding on the boyfriend raised the urgency of the situation, and the university

proceeded to send out more alerts of the changing situation, but by then it was too late.

Even after they realized he was not a likely suspect and had been traumatized by the news of his girlfriend's death, the police agencies involved in stopping and questioning Emily Hilscher's boyfriend did not treat him sympathetically; he deserved better care.

**Cho's Next Actions** – After shooting the two students in WAJ, Cho went back to his own dormitory, arriving at 7:17 a.m. (based on the record of his swipe card). He changed out of his blood-stained clothing, which was later found in his room. He accessed his university computer account at 7:25 a.m. and proceeded to delete his e-mails and wipe out his account. He then removed the hard drive of his computer and later disposed of it and his cell phone. Cho apparently also had planned to dispose of his weapons after using them in a different scenario because he had filed down the serial numbers on the guns.<sup>4</sup> Mentally disturbed killers often make one plan and then change it for some reason. The motivation may never be known for why he partially obscured his identity and did not carry any identification into Norris Hall, but then sent his manifesto to a national news network with his pictures.

Between 8:10 and 8:20 a.m., an Asian male thought now to be Cho was seen at the Duck Pond. (The pond has been searched unsuccessfully for the whereabouts of his phone and hard drive, which are still missing.)

Before 9:00 a.m., Cho went to the Blacksburg post office off campus, where he was recognized by a professor who thought he looked frightening. At 9:01 a.m., he mailed a package to NBC News in New York and a letter to the university's English Department.

**Diatribes** – The panel was allowed to view the material Cho sent to NBC. The package was signed "A. Ishmael," similar to the "Ax Ishmael"

<sup>4</sup> The ATF laboratory was able to raise the numbers and identify the weapons collected after the shootings.

name he had written on his arm in ink at the time he committed suicide and also the name he used to sign some e-mails. The significance of this name remains to be explained, but it may tie to his self-view as a member of the oppressed.

Inside the package was a CD with a group of about 20 videos of himself presenting his extreme complaints against the world, two rambling, single-spaced letters with much the same information that were used as the scripts for the videos, and pictures of himself with written captions. The pictures showed him wielding weapons, showing his preparations for a mass murder, and railing against society that had ill-treated him. He seemed to be trying to look powerful posing with weapons, the “avenger” for the mistreated and downtrodden of the world, and even its “savior”, in his words.

The videos and pictures in the package appear to have been taken at various times in a motel, a rented van, and possibly his dorm room over the previous weeks. It is likely that he alone took the photos; he can be seen adjusting the camera.

His words to the camera were more than most people had ever heard from him. He wanted his motivation to be known, though it comes across as largely incoherent, and it is unclear as to exactly why he felt such strong animosity. His diatribe is filled with biblical and literary references and references to international figures, but in a largely stream of consciousness manner. He mentions no one he knew in the videos. Rather, he portrays a grandiose fantasy of becoming a significant figure through the mass killing, not unlike American assassins of presidents and public figures. The videos are a dramatic reading or “performance” of the writings he enclosed. He read them several minutes at a time, then reached up to turn off the camera, changed the script he had mounted near the camera, and continued again. They clearly were not extemporaneous.<sup>5</sup> Intentionally or acciden-

tally, he even provided two takes of reading one portion of his written diatribe.

After the mailings, Cho’s exact path is unknown until he gets to Norris Hall.

## MOTIVATION FOR FIRST KILLINGS?

No one knows why Cho committed the first killings in the dormitory. He ran a great risk of being seen and having any of a number of things go wrong that could have thwarted his larger plan. One line of speculation is that he might have been practicing for the later killings, since he had never shot anyone before (some serial killers have been known to do this). He may have thought he would create a diversion to draw police away from where his main action would later be, though in fact it worked the opposite way. Many more police were on campus than would have been there without the first shootings, which allowed the response to the second incident to be much faster and in greater force. There is also a possibility that he considered attacking a woman as part of his revenge—he was known to have stalked at least three women in the previous year and had complaints registered against him, one from WAJ. Although there is a small possibility he knew the victim, no evidence of any connection has been found. In fact, he did not really know any of his victims that day, not faculty, roommates, or classmates. None of the speculative theories as to motive seem likely. The state and campus police have not closed their cases yet, in part trying to determine his motives.

## KEY FINDINGS

Generally the VTPD and BPD officers responded to and carried out their investigative duties in a professional manner in

<sup>5</sup> NBC News in New York has the package Cho sent to them and has released only a small amount of the material. There

is a balance between the public interest and the harm this material can do to families of victims, the potential for giving incentive to future shooters, and the possibility of hidden messages triggering actions of others. NBC spent much time wrestling with what was the responsible thing to do journalistically. It was a difficult set of decisions. They did not delay at all in getting the information package to the FBI well before they released any of it.

accordance with accepted police practices. However, the police conveyed the wrong impression to the university Policy Group about the lead they had and the likelihood that the suspect was no longer on campus.

The police did not have the capability to use the university alerting system to send a warning to the students, staff, and faculty. That is, they were not given the keyword to operate the alerting system themselves, but rather they had to request a message be sent from the Policy Group or at least the associate vice president for University Relations, who did have the keyword. The police did have the authority to request that a message be sent, but did not request that be done. They gave the university administration the information on the incident, and left it to the Policy Group to handle the messaging.

The university administration failed to notify students and staff of a dangerous situation in a timely manner. The first message sent by the university to students could have been sent at least an hour earlier and been more specific. The university could have notified the Virginia Tech community that two homicides of students had occurred and that the shooter was unknown and still at large. The administration could have advised students and staff to safeguard themselves by staying in residences or other safe places until further notice. They could have advised those not en route to school to stay home, though after 8 a.m. most employees would have been en route to their campus jobs and might not have received the messages in time.

Despite the above findings, there does not seem to be a plausible scenario of university response

to the double homicide that could have prevented a tragedy of considerable magnitude on April 16. Cho had started on a mission of fulfilling a fantasy of revenge. He had mailed a package to NBC identifying himself and his rationale and so was committed to act that same day. He could not wait beyond the end of the day or the first classes in the morning. There were many areas to which he could have gone to cause harm.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

***VII-1 In the preliminary stages of an investigation, the police should resist focusing on a single theory and communicating that to decision makers.***

***VII-2 All key facts should be included in an alerting message, and it should be disseminated as quickly as possible, with explicit information.***

***VII-3 Recipients of emergency messages should be urged to inform others.***

***VII-4 Universities should have multiple communication systems, including some not dependent on high technology.*** Do not assume that 21st century communications may survive an attack or natural disaster or power failure.

***VII-5 Plans for canceling classes or closing the campus should be included in the university's emergency operations plan.*** It is not certain that canceling classes and stopping work would have decreased the number of casualties at Virginia Tech on April 16, but those actions may have done so. Lockdowns or cancellation of classes should be considered on campuses where it is feasible to do so rapidly.